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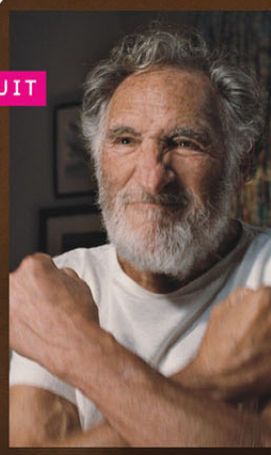

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WRITTEN BY STEVEN SPIELBERG & TONY KUSHNER

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# Glass Onion
a Knives Out mystery

Scan here to watch Rian Johnson and the cast on making the film

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VARIETY

# WRITER & Director

**PARK CHAN-WOOK** TAKES NOIR TO NEW HEIGHTS WITH 'DECISION TO LEAVE'.

BY CAROLE HORST AND PATRICK FRATER

# BIZ+BUZZ

## Oldies But Goodies

### Franchise films and other pics aimed at more mature audiences find a healthy life at the box office

By Gregg Goldstein

With endless talk about IP and franchises taking over theaters to attract young audiences, something often gets overlooked: the continuing box office power of adults, and the potential of franchises made for them.

The 35-and-older crowd fueled some of 2022's biggest hits. According to Comscore, they comprised 54% of domestic ticket buyers for the year's biggest success by far, the $719 million-grossing sequel "Top Gun: Maverick," along with 57% of the audience for the $151 million-winning biopic "Elvis" and half the turnout for the $67 million-earning actioner "The Woman King." All three were AFI Awards Movie of the Year winners and earned other top nominations.

Several adult-driven hits released just before the pandemic — like 2019's best picture Oscar winner "Parasite" (61% of its domestic audience was 35-plus, part of its $262.6 million global haul) and "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" (75% were 35-plus from its $61.7 million take) — show the potential for artier fare making a comeback and the promise of adult franchises. And no distributor is investing in more of them than Comcast/NBCUniversal specialty division Focus Features.

Expanding on its success with the 2019 big screen adaptation of "Downton Abbey" (78% of domestic tickets were bought by the 35-plus demo in its $194.7 million international gross for Focus/Universal) and 2022's "Downton

Cover photograph by Dan Doperalski

Tom Cruise's star power with mature audiences helped "Top Gun: Maverick" soar to the top of the box office.

Scott Garfield/Paramount Picture

"THE BEST FILM OF THE YEAR.
A sharp, funny, and utterly devastating work about the end of a friendship."
AP

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# *The* BANSHEES *Of* INISHERIN

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Abbey: A New Era" (75% ticket buyers were 35-plus, with the film scoring $92.6 million internationally), the distrib has more in the works. On Mother's Day they'll release "Book Club: The Next Chapter," the sequel to Paramount's $104.4 million global hit from 2018 with retiree-age stars Diane Keaton, Jane Fonda, Candice Bergen and Mary Steenburgen. This year, "My Big Fat Greek Wedding 3" will follow Universal's 2016 sequel (which took in $90.6 million worldwide) and the 2002 IFC Films original (which earned $368.7 million globally). And Robert Eggers' now-filming "Nosferatu" shows promise as an arty horror franchise.

"It didn't take us long to relate the ['Downton'] experience to what we consider our core competency, which is auteur filmmakers," says Focus Features chairman Peter Kujawski. "It's about finding ways to offer audiences that sense of a warm embrace of the familiar while still giving them something new each time. With 'Downton,' where there's a deep relationship audiences have to this world and these characters, we added new layers, like introducing the king and queen and a trip to France."

The success of adult franchises may help specialty distribs support award-season triumphs like "Tár," which Kujawski expects will make substantially more than its $5.6 million domestic gross when it's released overseas this year. "We view it like most studios or independent distributors do these days — everyone is taking some sort of portfolio approach to [the movies they're making]," he says.

And while no one is expecting McDonald's Happy Meal tie-ins, there are opportunities for merchandising and other endeavors. An exhibit of "Downton" sets and memorabilia is now touring the world, and specialty films like "Let the Right One In," "Fargo," "Snow Piercer" and "Hanna" found new life and profits as TV series.

Those questioning whether franchises for adults can succeed needn't look further than Rian Johnson's "Knives Out" mysteries. After the 2019 original grossed $312.8 million worldwide, Netflix paid a reported $450 million for two more films. Sixty-one percent of the original's domestic audience was 35-plus, according to Comscore.

"I don't really consider them sequels," says Johnson. "Taking a page from the way Agatha Christie wrote her books, I can use the same foundation of a detective character as a launching pad [for] something different every time: mixing genres, shaking up the tone, taking wild narrative swings. It almost gives me the cover to present something that audiences want to see, but that can really swing for the fences."

Does he envision more "Knives Out" films?" "I'll keep doing them as long as it feels like this," he says. "Even though I'm going right into the third one, and hopefully I'll make some other stuff before I continue, if I keep having the creative experience I've had on these two I can totally see coming back every few years to make one, for as long as [star] Daniel [Craig] is up for it."

Sequel "Book Club: The Next Chapter," from Focus Features, toplines Diane Keaton, from left, Jane Fonda, Candice Bergen and Mary Steenburgen.

Rita Moreno, from left, Jane Fonda, Lily Tomlin and Sally Field star in Paramount's "80 for Brady."

Franchises for adults arguably have a broader definition than sequels, remakes, reboots or spinoffs featuring familiar characters. Older audiences seek out films by certain auteurs with distinctive styles time and again, from Pedro Almodóvar to Quentin Tarantino. Wes Anderson, who helmed the $45.5 million-grossing comedy "Moonrise Kingdom" for Focus in 2012, returns with another star-filled comedy-drama, "Asteroid City," on June 16. Focus will also release Ethan Coen's first solo narrative feature this year. While there are few details about the untitled project, Kujawski says "it will feel like a lot of things Ethan's done before," with his brother Joel Coen, "that people have loved a great deal."

Certain genres could be considered adult franchises in their own right. The musical biopic is one: for 2019's R-rated Elton John tale "Rocketman," which earned $98.3 million, 68% of the audience was 35-plus. Results may vary, though. "Whitney Houston: I Wanna Dance With Somebody" has made $29.4 million globally since its holiday bow.

Other distinctive formulas include ensemble films with older actors like "Book Club," and the Feb. 3 release "80 for Brady" with Lily Tomlin, Jane Fonda, Rita Moreno and Sally Field. Rom-coms have been on life support in theaters, but the star power of George Clooney, 61, and Julia Roberts, 55, transcended mixed reviews and took their "Ticket to Paradise" to a $68.2 million gross, with 63% from age 35-plus moviegoers.

Another 2022 hit driven by older audiences was the mystery lit adaptation "Where the Crawdads Sing," which overcame mostly poor reviews to gross $90.2 million, with 52% of ticket buyers 35 and over. "As with their Gen Z counterparts, it may be star power, plot and, in particular, marketing power that gets this audience heading out to the multiplex," says Comscore senior media analyst Paul Dergarabedian. "Films like 'Top Gun: Maverick,' 'Elvis,' 'Where the Crawdads Sing,' 'Downton Abbey: A New Era' and of course 'Ticket to Paradise' all had that perfect combination of factors that ignited a spark for more mature moviegoers, particularly this past summer, which saw a strong slate of films aimed at this audience segment doing well at the ticket booth."

Film historian Jeanine Basinger, author of "Hollywood: The Oral History" (co-written with Sam Wasson), says the appeal of adult franchises is nothing new. "In 1930s, 40s and 50s Hollywood, serial films like 'Blondie' and 'Torchy Blaine' were franchises," she says. "They were very popular with older audiences. Even though you would think 'Tarzan' and [the family-centered] 'Andy Hardy' films would be for kids, older people liked them a lot. People love recurring characters. And now when I go to the movies, I see more old people than young people in theaters. It's a habit with us to go to the movies, and we want to go back."

Book Club: The Next Chapter: Riccardo Ghilardi/Endeavor Content; 80 for Brady: Paramount Pictures

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# Leaning Into the Fear

## 'Living' helmer Oliver Hermanus likes the scary stimulus of tackling unknown topics

By Shalini Dore

Oliver Hermanus is no stranger to the festival or awards circuit, but his latest film, "Living," is a very different story from those he has directed in the past, which have dealt with issues in his native South Africa. "Living," the tale of an English bureaucrat in 1950s London who decides to actually get something done instead of shuffling files, won accolades in Sundance, where it world premiered, and was released in the U.S. on Dec. 23 by Lionsgate.

"It was a really strange phone call," Hermanus says of being asked to direct the film, which stars Bill Nighy. Knowing that it was a remake of an Akira Kurosawa film with Nighy made it "really scary," but then he thought "why not?"

"It was written for Bill, it was a vision for Bill. I don't even know if Bill realizes how perfect he was [for the role]. I think it's obvious now, but then he really likes [writer Kazuo] Ishiguru, these people are really friendly, he likes the producers. I think in his mind he thinks 'what's the harm,' but then we realize it really is perfect for Bill."

Entering what he calls "Ishiguru land," Hermanus says he knew he would be working with "a certain kind of man, not in terms of Ishiguru but in terms of character, a certain kind of Englishness."

While Japan-born Ishiguru was fascinated with England after World War II as it was losing its grip on its empire, for Hermanus that bureaucratic milieu was also a familiar one. "I'm from South Africa. South Africa was a pretty controlled country for a long time. My racial background means my family was discriminated against in South Africa. I was born during Apartheid but by the time I was in high school, Apartheid was over, but I think I do have a certain understanding of systems because we were a system of degradation. My previous film ["Moffie"] was about the army in South Africa in the '80s and that was also a very complicated system. I think I connected with 'Living' on the idea man vs. X and this is in a way, man vs. life."

Oliver Hermanus, right, directs Bill Nighy on the set of "Living."

Hermanus says while he was shooting he had no idea of the kind of reception the film would receive. "You hope, but you never know. It's a very scary existence as a filmmaker," he says. "You read the screenplay and you go, 'I see this as something,' you imagine the actors in it, you imagine the feel of it, but this was a movie where I was really working it out constantly as I was going, particularly the post-production, injecting all the music into it. I had weird, strange musical interests, I was playing a lot of different things. And it was when I started doing that that I got a sense of what I was up to when I discovered our title sequence. My editor and I finessed that for weeks. It's those moments of creation where you kind of see it come together. But it's not always very clear."

Hermanus is very much involved when it comes to choosing the music in his films and says he knew he wanted to use 1940s and '50s American sound. It all came from the fact that the director likes to have a playlist when he starts working on films.

"I have a piece of music that I listen to a lot when I'm making a film and suddenly it will end up being in the film. And that is exactly what happened here again, where I said, 'Let's try the Vaughan Williams at the end' and it stuck."

Hemanus says, "What I actually like about filmmaking is that I do the thing that scares me the most … I've learned to lean into the fear."

Jamie D. Ramsay/Number 9 films/Sony Pictures Classics

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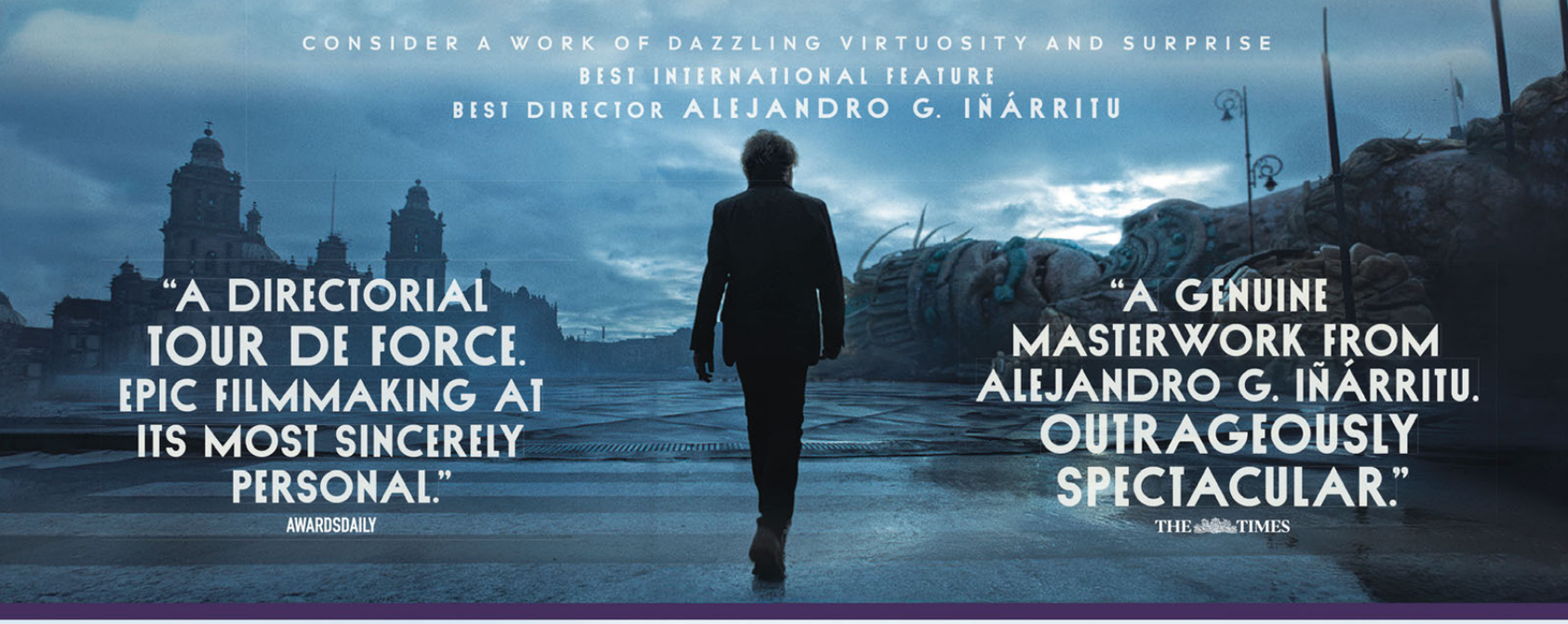

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WRITTEN BY
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# Timeless Portrait of a 'Lady'

## D.H. Lawrence's ideas are a perfect fit for today

By Tim Gray

Emma Corrin and Matthew Duckett portray the central couple in "Lady Chatterley's Lover."

Seamus Ryan/Netflix

**GRAY'S GOLD**

If modern filmgoers recognize the title "Lady Chatterley's Lover," it's probably because for decades the name was synonymous with book banning — in other words, a quaint period piece. But the new Netflix film, directed by Laure de Clermont-Tonnere and written by David Magee, shows that D.H. Lawrence's work has much more to offer than naughty titillation.

"It's a love story," de Clermont-Tonnere says, "and it's also about a woman who frees herself from class, her marriage and the patriarchy, to take control of her life and take ownership of her body. That resonates today even louder with modern audiences."

The novel was published privately in 1928 and then publicly in 1960, leading to watershed trials about censorship.

"The body of a woman is still the subject of political tensions," the director adds. "D.H. Lawrence wanted to express that sexuality is beautiful and pure, nothing shameful."

Lawrence's vision was also timely as he addressed the perils of industrialization and the abuse of nature.

But it was banned because he wrote about sexuality — and, even more scandalous, the sexuality of a woman. Plus she falls in love with a man of a lower class.

Near the beginning of the Netflix film, which is a possible Oscar contender, Connie marries Lord Clifford, who soon is injured in WWI and unable to father a child.

Since Clifford has inherited the family business and estate, he feels pressured to produce an heir. So he tells his wife to have an affair and get pregnant. She does have the affair, with Mellors, the estate's gamekeeper.

"The scene is very faithful to the book," the director says. "Connie doesn't know if it's a modern idea or a terrible idea. He's asking her to be mechanical. It becomes part of the idea of the machine, the industry in England destroying nature."

Clifford is also becoming mechanical; he aspires to be a novelist but instead gives that up to take over the factory.

The director was approached about the film during COVID lockdown. "When I read the script, I discovered the novel in a new light; the characters' need for connection seemed so strong because we were deprived of it. Also, the themes of imprisonment, of nature and freedom, made it something I needed to explore."

"If it was only about sex, it's not interesting. Behind that sex is a lot of tenderness and those emotions push the relationship into a romance."

In casting, de Clermont-Tonnere thought of Emma Corrin (who prefers they/them pronouns). "The first time I met with Emma, I could see the distinct energy they have; they bring you to the here and now. The way they talk, walk, with a nonchalance, that was so effortless; but there's a rebellion inside them that gives a vivid light."

As for Mellors, de Clermont-Tonnere says, "It's easy to portray him as the Man in the Woods Who Doesn't Talk. But it's a complex character; he's been betrayed and lives like a monk. He gave up on humanity, but is craving for a connection and has such vulnerability and tenderness. When I met Jack [O'Connell], I saw he has a balance between raw and refined.

Matthew Duckett, who makes his film debut, has cerebral palsy. "We all talked about the role of Clifford, we obviously wanted to open the casting to people with disabilities," she says.

# Kate Hudson

## 'Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery'

By Stuart Miller

Kate Hudson's latest character is "actually quite sad."

"She's being held onto by this billionaire that she probably doesn't like very much but feels tied to," Hudson says. "She deeply needs to be validated and seen and heard to the point where it's self-destructive. She always gets in her own way."

No, Hudson is not in some new movie you haven't heard about yet. She's talking about Birdie Jay, the delightful comic confection she brings to life in "Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery." Hudson says that when you analyze the flighty Birdie, her problems seem quite heavy but on screen, she flits through as comic relief.

"She's an absolutely fabulous character with hilarious lines any comedic actor would love," says Hudson, who rose to stardom with her Oscar-nominated turn in "Almost Famous" and became a rom-com staple with hits such as "Bride Wars," "How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days" and "You, Me and Dupree."

While Birdie scans superficially as outrageous, Hudson says the script provided her with ability to ground her character in genuine emotions. "I don't get to play complex comedic characters very often but here you could see what was motivating her desire to be the center of everything," she says. "This was such a dream."

Hudson says all those layers were in Rian Johnson's script from the get-go. "Birdie just popped on the page," she recalls. "When I got to read it, I said, 'Let me go bulldoze his door down.' The highs and lows and nuances were all on the page. I just wanted to say, 'Put me in, coach.'"

One reason she was so eager to go was she immediately felt like she could see and feel Birdie. "What leaped off the page was her movement and I think the dancer in me got excited," she says. The first time I met Rian I said, 'I know how she walks' and I couldn't wait to get into that. Her physicality was wonderful."

Hudson also felt Birdie's physicality was essential to understanding her character, even if audiences don't consciously pick up on how it reflects her impatience and unhappiness. "She can't sit still so her foot is going or she's touching another person or touching her own clothes. She constantly has to distract herself with her movement."

Those clothes she is touching are another memorable part of Birdie and Hudson says the clothing definitely informed the performance. "Costume is essential, especially with a character like Birdie, with her fluid and accessorized outfits," says Hudson, who has at various points had her own fashion lines, including the successful athleisure brand Fabletics. "Jenny Egan did the costumes and she is very collaborative. The moment I got into the first fitting with her I could see Birdie Jay come to life. It was a bucket list type of wardrobe"

For all of Birdie's "me, me, me" desires, Hudson also had to make sure she fit seamlessly into the cast (admittedly, almost all unhappy egomaniacs as well). She says because the film's tone was so specific it was a challenge for the actors, but that the whole cast "encouraged each other to play more and have fun with that tone."

That chemistry, she says, owes a great deal to Johnson casting as if he were throwing a dinner party.

"I think he was looking at personalities as much as everything else," she says, adding that off the set they'd frequently play their own murder mystery games at night. ("I was very impressed with Janelle's commitment to everything," she says of co-star Janelle Monáe. "They showed up for game night with a cape, mustache and top hat. Where on earth did they find a top hat and cape in Belgrade?")

The on- and off-set bonding had the feel of a summer theater acting troupe. "It must look crazy from the outside with us being geeky about how much we love what we do," she says, "but when you're inside, it's so meaningful and rewarding and nourishing."

John Wilson/Netflix

Kate Hudson plays a model turned clothing magnate in Rian Johnson's "Glass Onion."

# Locations Added Dimension to Gotham

## 'The Batman' created a familiar world with a twist

By Zoe Hewitt

Taking a big-budget Hollywood movie to shoot on location is more than just popping over to a pretty spot someone remembers visiting once. In fact, one aspect of finding the right locations for "The Batman," starring Robert Pattinson, involved the ubiquitous search engine Google.

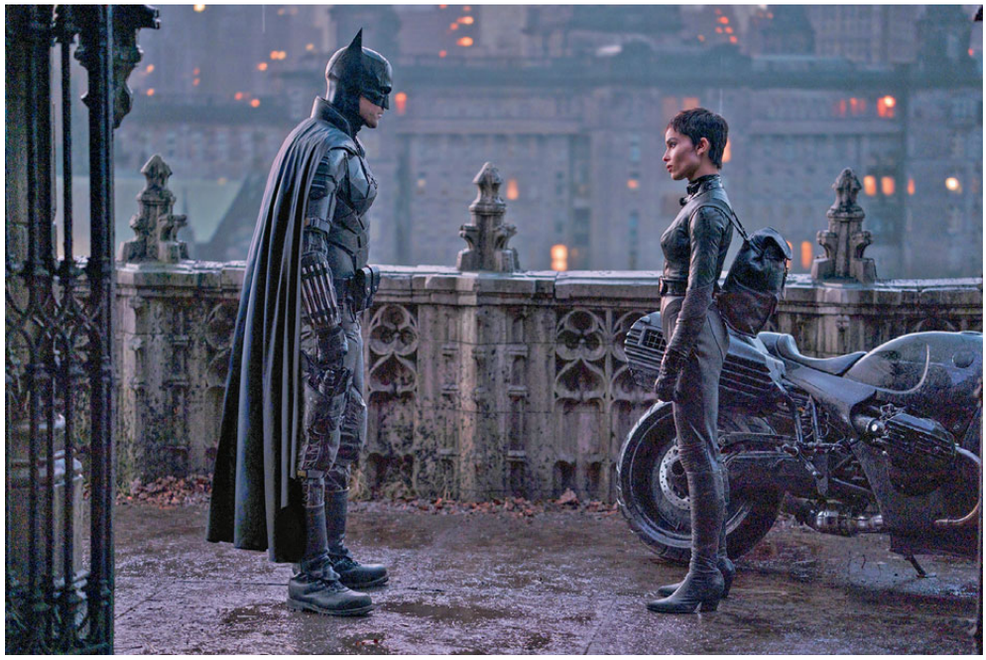
"Matt [Reeves, the director] and I started a global search looking at various cities, mostly on Google Earth," says production designer James Chinlund. "We found this amazing location called Wellington Square in Liverpool and that really opened a whole door for me to the north of England." Eventually, that led the team to Manchester as well Glasgow, Scotland.

The historic cities provided the right blend of Gothic architecture and patina for the look Reeves and Chinlund had in mind. With so many prior iterations of Gotham City already preserved in television, film and comic books, Chinlund explains the challenge was creating a new space within the world.

"It was really quite an intimidating thing, trying to figure out how we could deliver something new for the fans, and yet something that felt familiar, too," says Chinlund.

The opening crowd scene in Gotham Square became their initial focus in sourcing locations. "We knew [that scene] was going to really define the essence of the city," he adds.

The work didn't stop once the locations were selected — among other design considerations was the level of gunk inherent in most large cities, but in a movie-sanitized way. Enter the trash makers.



"The Batman," starring Robert Pattinson and Zoe Kravitz, depicts a gritty, gothic Gotham.

"We created this recipe that we called the Bat Mix," explains Chinlund. "It was basically like grit, just layers and buckets of grime and wet paper, gravel and [trash] like cigarette butts."

Each location was coated in the special mix. Making it was a constant, months-long process, since the spaces were massive.

It's easy to imagine the crew going home to their families at the end of the day, talking about their work product: What did you do today? I made trash!

Chinlund laughs: "Beautiful trash, some of the best trash I've ever seen."

Chinlund used technology to keep everything as cost-effective as possible. "We basically built the whole world of Gotham in the computer before we shot it so we could take locations and sets and stitch them all together."

This allowed Reeves and director of photography Greig Fraser to fully plan the shots, action and what needed to be built as a result of each. "We [were] really using new technologies as a filmmaking tool, and that was super exciting," he reflects.

Since there were multiple huge crowd scenes planned, finding the right locations was tricky and pulled them in various directions, leading to a lot of pivoting early in the process. Suddenly, along came COVID and as challenging as the period was, "it was actually a blessing," Chinlund says. "It really opened up a lot of these public spaces to us that were unavailable [earlier] so that was an interesting twist in our journey."

The most exciting sets to design were Wayne Tower and the Batcave, elements that he calls the "backbone of the film." Noting that previous iterations of the Batman story had Wayne Industries providing the hero with his gadgets, "we were excited about the idea of Bruce doing it himself," Chinlund explains. "We really wanted to make sure [the spaces] felt holistic and represented that story. [The city-based location of] Wayne Tower [made Batman] a real urban hero who was part of the fabric of the city."

Jonathan Olley/Warner Bros.

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# PEAK Park

Director *Park Chan-wook* says making 'Decision to Leave' proved therapeutic

*Story by*
**CAROLE HORST AND PATRICK FRATER**

*Photograph by*
**DAN DOPERALSKI**

**MUCH OF THE WORLD** knows Korean entertainment through superstar pop music performers like BTS and Black Pink. Then, with "Squid Game," the world fell for Korean drama. And thanks to Bong Joon Ho and his "Parasite" Oscar-winner, more of the planet has learned of the powerhouse that is Korean cinema. The Korean film industry's proficiency is scarcely new. Bong, together with the likes of Kim Jee-woon ("A Bittersweet Life") and the multihyphenate Park Chan-wook are part of a cohort of leading directors who emerged at the beginning of the millennium and remain at the forefront. Over some two decades, they have given Korean cinema an impeccable reputation for combining style, substance and smart storytelling.

With his latest drama, "Decision to Leave," on the Oscar international film shortlist after a glittering run on the festival circuit and a successful worldwide release, it is now Park's turn in the spotlight.

"Decision" has been described as a modern-day film noir, as Det. Jang Hae-joon (played by Park Hae-il as if he was just transported from the 1946 Warner Bros. lot) investigates a murder. Naturally, the victim's wife, Song Seo-rae (a fabulous Tang Wei channeling both Barbara Stanwyck and Joan Crawford) is the prime suspect. Jang falls hard for Song, but of course, nothing is at it appears. Not even for Park, the film's director.

"To be honest with you, I didn't start off trying to make a modern portrayal of the noir genre, but rather I wanted to start off from that genre and then move beyond it," says Park.

Stretching a genre beyond what audiences expect is something fans of Park's oeuvre have come to expect. "Joint Security Area" (2000), "Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance" (2002), "Lady Vengeance" (2005), "I'm a Cyborg, But That's OK" (2006), "Stoker" (2013) and "Oldboy" (2003) — the octopus dinner scene is now iconic — established Park as kinetic with the camera, an impeccable stylist and willing to unleash captivating doses of sex and ultra-violence.

In 2016's critically acclaimed "The Handmaiden," Park plays with a twisty plot, graphic sex and lots of double-crossing — and love — all set in Japanese-occupied Korea, adding another layer for audiences to unpack. But to Park, "Decision to Leave" is definitely a love story.

"Before making this movie, I thought to myself, if I tell everybody that I'm making another love story, would they laugh at me?" Park says. "I brought that on myself because I've always had too much violence and sex in my movies. So, people have been disregarding them as love stories."

Park continues: "So I realized I had to get rid of that veil in order for people to see the romance story that rests inside. I had to tone down the violence and nudity that takes over people's [perceptions] of my films. And that's when people will finally be able to see the romance story within."

His breakdown of "Decision" is revealing. "When we reach part two of the story, there is no longer any doubt or suspense. It's no longer about whether this woman killed or didn't kill her husband, because it's so blatantly obvious," Park explains. "At that point it is no longer a film noir or a mystery film. The question now becomes, why did the woman move to a new city, and choose to go to the very city where the detective had [also] moved?'"

The film launched at the 2022 Cannes Film Festival with a bang, winning Park a best director accolade. He's no stranger to Cannes, having competed there with four times, and winning prizes for "Thirst" and "Oldboy."

Park says that making "Decision" was a form of therapy. "Back when I was working on [TV miniseries] 'Little Drummer Girl' in London, I'd been abroad for so long. It was physically tormenting directing six episodes there as well," he remembers. "By the time we reached post-production, psychologically speaking, I was very tired and homesick."

While in the U.K., Park turned to his screenwriting partner Chung Seo-kyung, whom he met on "Lady Vengeance," and with whom he has collaborated on "The Handmaiden," "Thirst" and "I'm a Cyborg." Their highly evolved ability to think each other's thoughts and finish each other's sentences means Chung has also made uncredited contributions to other Park films, including his sole English-language effort, "Stoker."

Chung had "taken her family on a trip to London for their holiday, but also to make me feel better," Park admits bashfully.

"I want to make a Korean film next — what should I do? That's how the conversation started. And I think she actually said in an interview that brainstorming the ideas for a new script had probably been therapeutic for [me]."

With "Decision," Park again probes the "other" — Chinese actor Tang plays an immigrant, giving the film a subtext of pan-Asian immigration, identity politics and history of subjugation in the region. Asian filmmakers are increasingly probing these issues, especially in Korea, with series such as "Pachinko." Identity issues also underlie a wave of recent films made in Korea by overseas-based Asian directors, including Davy Chou's "Return to Seoul," He Shuming's "Ajoomma" and Kore-eda Hirokazu's "Broker."

It's an exciting time for the Korean industry and for Korean filmmakers.

"We used to share scripts quite frequently in the past," Park says of heavyweights like Bong. "But now everyone's so

**Love Story**
*Park Hae-il, below, plays a detective who falls for femme fatale Tang Wei, right, in "Decision to Leave"*

busy and they're never in the same country, so it's become more difficult.

"I've never really considered my colleagues as rivals. I don't know what they think. But for me personally, I think they're just people who inspire me. I have a lot of respect for them. And on top of that, I guess they've also helped me. Ever since 'Parasite' did so well abroad, it's helped a lot of Korean films get more attention."

In his role as producer, mentor and short-film maker, Park works with many filmmakers including younger brother Park Chan-kyong (Berlin Golden Bear-winning short "Night Fishing"), "Joint Security Area" screenwriter Lee Moo-young and Lee Kyoung-mi — Park wrote and produced her debut film, "Crush and Blush."

Is there something special about this generation of Korean filmmakers?

"I thought about that question a lot because we all have such different personalities. If I were to ask myself, what do they have in common? I think the first thing first [is that] they're all cinephiles who love watching movies, especially relative to the prior generations," says Park. Bong was the founder of the elite film club called Yellow Door.

> "I'VE ALWAYS HAD TOO MUCH VIOLENCE AND SEX IN MY MOVIES"
>
> **–PARK CHAN-WOOK**

"Labeling them as cinephiles, I don't know if it works, but relatively speaking, within Korea, they are. I personally don't watch too many movies or watch them multiple times," he says with a laugh.

Park is now in Los Angeles as executive producer of "The Sympathizer," starring Robert Downey Jr., from A24 for HBO. "It has been easier. First of all, for 'Little Drummer Girl,' I directed all six episodes, but for this one I'm only directing three out of seven. And of course, the Korean food [in Los Angeles] helps!" Park laughs.

The series, based on Viet Tanh Nguyen's 2016 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, centers on a mole from North Vietnam embedded in the South Vietnamese army. But when the mole is exiled to the U.S., he remains tied to the local South Vietnamese community, eventually returning to Vietnam to fight the communists.

Downey Jr., Susan Downey and Amanda Burrell also executive produce along with Niv Fichman and Kim Ly.

"Working with Robert — he's such an amazing actor and such an energetic man and a joy to be around. It's been really great to be working with him. Also, Robert's wife Susan is such an intelligent woman and a smart producer. It's been great to work with her and she's been tremendous help to me," he says.

The Korean Wave looks far from losing any power.

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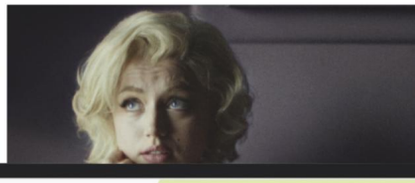

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# Writers & Directors

**Directors of award season contenders tackle big issues of power and privilege, while screenwriters wrestle with relatable biopics of long-gone stars**

# Prowling the Halls of Power

## From 'The Inspection' to 'Tár,' helmers navigate the privilege of characters

By Zoe Hewitt

**Power and privilege** are often parts of the same formula — one almost inevitably leads to the other. The films of this award season examine the phenomenon in myriad ways: from factual to fictional, and within institutions as disparate as the military and the classical music community. The directors behind "The Inspection," "Devotion," "The Woman King" and "Tár" explored these dynamics both thematically and visually while shepherding their characters through four very different but equally powerful stories.

For "The Inspection," director Elegance Bratton, whose film is based on his life experience, joining the Marines gave him a purpose and place that otherwise never existed for him.

"People assume that I named myself," says Bratton, though he didn't. He recognizes that it evokes assumptions even before anyone lays eyes on him, but intersectionality doesn't bequeath a gay, Black man much. "[This is] my experience as a person who's born on the outskirts of privilege. [It's how] I can continue to arm myself with the skills I need to survive the onslaught of what it means to be myself in the world that we all share."

↑ Jeremy Pope plays a Marine recruit in "The Inspection."

The military gave Bratton, depicted on screen via the character of Ellis French (Jeremy Pope), an inherent sense of inclusion just from putting on the same uniform as his fellow recruits. But if the Marines necessarily provided the framework for a hierarchy of power, it's more than uniforms and "yes sir" affirmations to superior officers that reinforce their well-established structure.

"You also have the culture of men evaluating each other's bodies, and certain body types are privileged over other body types, and features and appendages … but one thing that is certain is that we are all oppressed in our status as recruits," Bratton says. "And for me, that was normal."

French, like his real-life counterpart, was kicked out of his mother's house for being gay, a story that's all too real for LGBTQ+ youth. Nonprofit org School on Wheels estimates 2.5 million children experience homelessness

A24

annually in the United States. "French can't just be me," notes Bratton, "but I was French."

Comparing the military to other male-dominated spaces brings further revelations. "The Marine Corps is like the Harvard of masculinity," says Bratton. "As an out Black gay man, you've gone to all sorts of all male spaces ... where men congregate to find romantic connection and then you assume that the other side, this heterosexual male space, is something that you'll fail in ... [and] it's so arbitrary because once you get in the space with the straight men, you realize, oh my God, it's just like the gay bar, except supposedly none of these people want to have sex with each other."

Bratton's film suggests that masculinity and femininity are arbitrary. "This whole movie is about trying to assert a possibility that being a 'real' man is a problem for every man," Bratton says. "Ellis learns ... that forgiveness can be the source of male strength."

If "The Inspection" reexamines stereotypical masculinity, its complement is "The Woman King." The film, directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood, is also based on a true story, about a group of women warriors whose strength on the battlefield isn't societally endorsed like it is for men.

Prince-Bythewood knew immediately it "was important to establish these women as skilled and athletic and strong and formidable."

When asked about imagery that makes audiences reconsider the role, and strength, of Black women in battle, Prince-Bythewood references a famous quote by Malcolm X: "The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman."

Establishing this conspicuously unique dynamic in an historic setting was particularly meaningful in the context of contemporary notions of societal power and privilege. "That feeling [of] invisibility and a lack of respect and a lack of protection [in life], it's in your head, it's embedded, and yet to be able to see yourself again in a way that you are actually revered" is potent, Prince-Bythewood says. Not only do people who are typically underrepresented get to see themselves on screen, but afterward take that feeling of empowerment out into the world.

Prince-Bythewood focused on blocking to amplify those thematic elements. When Nanisca (Viola Davis) is introduced, she is "alone, rising out of the grasses, which I think is such a powerful image, but certainly sets the tone that this is our leader, this is our hero." Oftentimes, Nanisca is flanked by her two lieutenants so they stand out visually as a group, suggesting these three belong together.

This sort of categorization is taught in school at young ages: notice what doesn't belong, or what stands out as different, and then examine why.

Director J.D. Dillard used a similar approach in "Devotion," a film based on the true story of Korean war hero Jesse L. Brown (Jonathan Majors). Frequently, Brown is positioned further back than the others in group settings. Or, a wide master shot shows everyone except for Jesse, who appears only in the reverse.

"This is a great way to hold Jesse in the periphery," Dillard says. The same goes for the use of hats and sunglasses, and those who do and don't wear them. "At every step of the way, out loud and subconscious dialogue, [we find] those ways to tell that story visually."

He recalls a photo they came across during research in which Jesse is the only one wearing a green flight suit while everyone else is in beige. "That's not to say that there was any foul play," that just felt significant. "We don't have the answers why."

Sometimes, questions only lead to more questions. Todd Field, writer and director of "Tár," created such a powerful fictional world that one of Google's most frequently searched topics about the movie is if it's a true story. (It isn't.)

Field conceived his main character Lydia Tár (Cate Blanchett) as a woman with the understanding that audiences would settle in with different expectations. "We've been looking at a particular [gender of] individual that holds power for a very, very long time. It hasn't even been a question ... [and] we're attenuated to how we're supposed to feel about that," says Field.

Historically, there has never been a female chief conductor of a major German orchestra, or of any of the big five American ones. "[Lydia] chasing what she sees as a continuity of power and that drug that she's addicted to is a patriarchal power, it's not a matriarchal power," says Field. "Tár" further examines if power corrupts, regardless of who is at the helm, by separating it from those who so frequently have it.

Big questions linger long after the end of all of these films. Does putting a woman in charge constitute matriarchal power? Is a woman warrior inherently feminine? Is a gay Marine inherently masculine? More broadly, does transference of power become transformative?

Asking audiences to form their own conclusions is essential to the medium, even as the medium drops hints and makes inferences of its own. Shakespeare declared in "Hamlet" that playing this way holds a mirror up to nature. Films such as these require, and inspire, audiences to be brave enough to take and long and hard look at the truths they reflect.

↓ "Devotion" stars Jonathan Majors as a Navy pilot during the Korean war.

Eli Adé/Sony Pictures

# New Tech Helps Drive Toons

## But animation directors depend on plot despite cutting-edge innovations

By Paul Plunkett

**The diversity** of animated features — both content and assembly — continues to evolve in lockstep with filmmaking technology's almost daily leaps and bounds. This ever-changing landscape creates new challenges and opportunities for directors to tell stories that encapsulate everything from epic blockbuster spectacles to personal, relationship-driven dramas.

"Animation is such a powerful medium in exploring complicated themes in an easily accessible way," says Pixar director Domee Shi, whose "Turning Red" tells the coming-of-age story of Mei, a 13-year-old girl in 2000s-era Toronto, who turns into a giant red panda at the onset of puberty. "I think animation also almost tricks the audience into believing magical logic a little bit more, because it's already an abstracted version of reality."

In a process that took more than four years, Shi utilized some of the industry's most cutting-edge technologies to progressively expand her team of collaborators, from two co-writers (Sarah Streicher for the first draft and then Julia Cho for subsequent ones), to all the additional eyes, ears, hands and eventual voices that brough the film to life.

During the 2020 COVID lockdown, she held remote discussions with her co-DP Mahyar Abousaeedi (along with Jonathan Pytko) about the scale of the stadium location for a pivotal sequence.

Shi recalls, "He said, 'How about I take you inside the stadium just to show you how big and small it actually is?'" Using VR equip-

Pixar/Disney

→ Domee Shi's "Turning Red" explores puberty and all the trauma that can bring.

ment shipped to her home, they explored the dimensions of the location together. "I'm standing in my guest room and we're popping around the stadium. It was fun," she says.

Shi worked her way through the Pixar ranks as a story artist ("Inside Out"), storyboard artist ("Incredibles 2," "Toy Story 4"), and won an Oscar for animated short film for 2018's "Bao."

Despite her use of such high-tech tools, she always sees character as the core of the work.

"I know that each director approaches a film differently, but for me I found a lot of success through character-first, instead of story-first or plot-first," she says. "For me, the character of Mei and her mother, that was the first thing that materialized."

Starting with a personal seed idea that grew into a feature also applies to Henry Selick's "Wendell & Wild," which began 20 years ago as a sketch he drew of his two young sons as demons, and a corresponding seven-page story that he tucked away at the time.

The veteran director ("Coraline," "Nightmare Before Christmas") became a fan of Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele from their Comedy Central show and thought the duo would be a good fit for his demon siblings.

"They were both interested in working with me, but Jordan wanted to do more," says Selick, noting the conversation took place in 2015, just before "Get Out" altered Peele's career trajectory. "He basically pitched the idea of being a full collaborator with me — he didn't want to just do voices."

Selick and Peele worked together on the script, reworking elements and characters, and began animation tests in summer 2018. After an almost yearlong shutdown due to COVID, the film arrived on Netflix in the fall after premiering at this year's Toronto Intl. Film Festival.

↑ "Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio" takes stop-motion animation to more sophisticated levels.

While Selick's brand of stop-motion animation dates back to old-school classics from directors including Ray Harryhausen, he keeps an open mind toward modern innovations.

"After decades of doing this, there are certain things that are settled, but I also like to explore new things," he says, describing a sequence in "Wendell & Wild" in which the eponymous brothers invade a dream of the protagonist, Kat, as gigantic floating hands and faces. "We came up with a brand-new technique for how to make those hands and faces and how to animate them. They're not like anything else that's ever been done in stop motion."

The painstaking, hands-on work that goes into stop-motion animation is also on display this season in another Netflix film, "Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio," which del Toro and his co-director Mark Gustafson spent more than a decade developing, even before its five years of meticulous production.

"The medium is my favorite medium. I practiced it, taught it at school and even did it professionally in Mexico, but it had been decades since trying to reapproach it," says del Toro. "I thought a story about a puppet in a world of puppets was ideal and it would charm audiences with something that felt handmade and hand carved, painted, rendered, and lit. There is something magical about it."

Del Toro, whose stunningly visual and fantastical films include Oscar-winners "The Shape of Water" and "Pan's Labyrinth," adds that "Pinocchio" is not a film for young children (but kids can watch it if their parents talk to them), and that he hopes animation can participate in some of the conversations live-action films enjoy during awards seasons, such as cinematography and production design.

"And I hope we can also more steadily produce films that raise the status of animation," he says. "Animation is not a genre. It's a medium, and we should seek diverse ways to use it."

Like Selick, co-director Gustafson, who also served as animation director on "Fantastic Mr. Fox," also credits Harryhausen as an inspiration. "We stand on the shoulders of giants and push forward one frame at a time," he says.

Because the locations, action and laws of nature are boundless in animation, legend and folklore offer a fertile ground for creativity, and this year's "Puss in Boots: The Last Wish," a spinoff the the "Shrek" films from DreamWorks Animation, is no exception. Previous "Shrek" films had explored characters from across the fairy tale pantheon, but there was more territory to explore.

"We dipped into some new fairy tale territory, which is the Grimm fairy tales, which can get a little dark, and that was exciting," says "Puss in Boots" director Joel Crawford.

He and his team wanted to create a complementary visual style for the film to enhance the mythic, storybook feeling they wanted to convey.

"What if it looked like you were dropped into a fairy tale painting? So you can almost see the brush strokes on everything," Crawford says. "You just feel like you're immersed in a fairy tale, mixing the CG with a hand-drawn feel."

As with Shi at Pixar, Crawford spent years at DreamWorks working on films as a story artist ("Shrek Forever After," "Kung Fu Panda 2") and head of story ("Trolls") before first leaping into the director's chair for "The Croods: A New Age" and now "Puss in Boots." Consequently, each of these directors is quick to credit their teams and the hundreds — if not thousands — of hands that bring their fairy-tale characters, giant red pandas, purgatorial demons and puppets who wish to be real, to life for audiences of all ages. They understand all too vividly what it's like to be in the shoes of the people to whom he's giving marching orders.

"Animation, it's so collaborative," he says. "The more that you understand all of the work that goes on behind the scenes, if you're asking for something, most of the time you know it's not easy. You know it's going to require some blood sweat and tears to push things."

**"After decades of doing this, there are certain things that are settled, but I also like to explore new things." — Henry Selick**

Netflix

# Writers Wrestle With Legends

## From 'Blonde' to 'Weird,' screenwriters figured out ways to make icons relatable to contempo auds

By Todd Gilchrist

**Pop cultural icons** and artistic greats will always be a source of fascination — for filmmakers and audiences. Chronicling what they accomplished, much less who they are, means identifying their accomplishments, and then communicating them to viewers whose firsthand knowledge of a career or body of work may be limited, one-dimensional or nonexistent. A number of films, including "Elvis," "Whitney Houston: I Wanna Dance With Somebody," "Blonde" and "Weird: The Al Yankovic Story," challenged storytellers in 2022 to find different ways to encapsulate their subjects' lives in terms that contemporary moviegoers could relate to or understand.

Anthony McCarten, producer and screenwriter of "I Wanna Dance With Somebody," says that Whitney Houston's meteoric rise presaged an era in which individuals achieve explosive popularity with increasing ease.

"The Andy Warhol '15 minutes of fame' thing is going up all the time. People are getting famous on the basis of almost nothing, or surprising things are making them famous," McCarten says. "Looking at the Whitney Houston story, here's a young girl who the version today would be become a TikTok star overnight ... 18 years old, suddenly a recording contract with Arista. Within her first two albums, she had this tremendous level of success."

↑ Naomi Ackie plays the Whitney Houston in biopic "Whitney Houston: I Wanna Dance With Somebody."

As he created a timeline of Houston's life, McCarten catalogued many of her personal and professional benchmarks, from her historic performance of "The Star Spangled Banner" at the 1991 Super Bowl to her still unbroken record of seven consecutive No. 1 singles, ensuring that director Kasi Lemmons' portrait of the late star balanced essential information and irresistible entertainment.

"You have to put in lines to say, 'as the No. 1 singles are piling up,' to make the audience is aware that this has never been done before," he says. "But also when you show her in stadiums, it's got to be a bravura cinema style to it so that you just see this vastness of this audience love for her and the love she had for her audiences. She could reduce the stadium to the intimacy of a living room. She just did it with her voice and her soul."

Capturing the essence of a performer or an individual whose iconography changes at different ages can be especially difficult. In "Elvis," co-writer and director Baz Luhrmann worked diligently with cinematographer Mandy Walker to re-create the performances of rock 'n' roll trailblazer Elvis Presley based on video footage from later in his career, but only had still images to draw on from the 1950s, when his mythic persona was first being defined. "One thing we just assumed would be a no-brainer is the '50s, is the early stuff, but of course, it's also the one that doesn't really have much reference," Luhrmann tells *Variety*.

"We knew we were re-creating those moments, but then how were we going to tell the story of young Elvis to an audience that related to him musically and to, obviously, the drama," adds Walker. "A lot of testing and a lot of referencing [Alfred Wertheimer's] stills photography

Emily Aragones/TriStar Pictures

at that time, that was a bigger reference for us visually."

Luhrmann says what unexpectedly gave them confidence they could pull off their onscreen Presley's journey was star Austin Butler's performance in the first sequence they shot, of the live shows from the late 1960s.

"The Vegas concert was amazing," he says. "The Austin and Elvis of it, in terms of the '60s and the '70s, was answered within the first two weeks. We just knew we had it. And then we were doing acting scenes, and it wasn't an impersonation. I mean, he was humanizing Elvis. Everybody was moved on that set."

The question of relatability was subsequently answered (positively) upon the film's release, when Butler's verisimilitude with Presley became a social media trend: "you go on TikTok and kids have sewn Austin and the real Elvis together," Luhrmann says. "They do that one which I love, which is like a dream, where they intercut real Elvis and our footage ... and even I have to keep checking it."

Presley was an indirect inspiration for director Eric Appel on "Weird: The Al Yankovic Story," his portrait of the life of Yankovic, creator of some of the most famous and successful song parodies of all time.

"What we're commenting on is, imagine if Weird Al's parody songwriting was like the invention of rock 'n' roll — that changing the words of the lyrics and making them about food was like Elvis gyrating his hips in front of an audience for the first time," Appel says. "In our bizarro universe, the silliest thing imaginable, which is coming up with parody song lyrics, is the most innovative thing that's ever happened."

Suffice it to say that accuracy was not a priority on "Weird: The Al Yankovic Story" for Appel, despite (or perhaps because of) co-writing the biography with Yankovic.

"Watching the movie, you're never going to get a clear picture of who Al is as a person," he confesses, though he says they did depict one event from his career that's true to life. "'My Bologna' was actually recorded in a bathroom," he says. Yet as polished and cinematic as it is as a whole, their film serves as a send-up of traditional biopics, an approach that perfectly suited the career and legacy of an artist best-known for joke versions of pop standards.

"Al's music always sounded like the real song, and then the words come in and they make you sort of re-examine what's happening," Appel says. "We wanted to do that with the movie and making it look and feel with the cinematography and the performances and the caliber of actor that we cast in this, that it feels like a real Oscar bait biopic, and it's just that the words are different. And for those audience members that don't know all that, that sort of tells them all they need to know about who he is."

→ "Weird: The Al Yankovic Story" stars Quinta Brunson and Daniel Radcliffe as titular Weird Al.

In "Blonde," writer-director Andrew Dominik doesn't so much tell the audience all they need to know about Marilyn Monroe, his tragic subject, as invite them to experience her life through her eyes. "We don't see her, we see with her, and the film is fair to nothing but her feelings," Dominik says. He, like Appel and Yankovic, was similarly unbeholden to a "true" account of Monroe's experiences, although Dominik deployed dramatic license not to indulge his mischievous creativity as a storyteller but to match the approach of its source material, the novel of the same name by Joyce Carol Oates.

"The film is based on a novel that is not concerned with factual accuracy so much as it is with the themes of her life," he says. "It wants to put you inside her struggle for identity in a way that's visceral and psychologically true."

Juxtaposing broader thematic ideas and meticulous re-creations of specific moments in her career proved a daunting challenge for Dominik and his collaborators, who brought to life images that even as still photographs remain synonymous with Monroe today. "Re-creating the existing imagery was a fun and sometimes spooky process," he says. "I think it helps if people are familiar with the images that the film is flipping the meanings of."

In "flipping their meaning," Dominik explains that he aimed to merge our relationship with these moments — distant, imagined and yet woven inextricably into a shared cultural fabric — with the subjectivity of what Monroe went through, or may have. "The film wants to harness the existing cultural memory of her, and turn it inside out, to express the personal nightmare she was trapped inside of."

Though each filmmaking team begins with different aims, successfully communicating an icon's enduring impact or significance ultimately comes down to how much the story told makes viewers care about their subject. "'Blonde' is not concerned with contextualizing Marilyn Monroe, listing her accomplishments or explaining to an audience what was 'special' about her from the outside," he says. "It's concerned with her inner experience, that of an unwanted child who hardly feels seen, let alone 'special.'"

Amidst spectacular events and intimate moments, lives alternately thoroughly documented and completely manufactured, figures such as Monroe and Presley, Houston and Yankovic ultimately maintain their status in popular culture not because of what they achieved, but who they are. These films generate entertainment from qualities that are often ephemeral — but when possessed by the right person, prove undeniable.

"Exceptional people are always going to be interesting," Dominik says.

↓ Austin Butler has earned raves as Elvis Presley in "Elvis."

Elvis: Warner Bros. Pictures; Weird: The Al Yankovic Story: Aaron Epstein/Roku

# Li Jun Li

**"I know for myself, I need to ride this wave and enjoy it."**

By Todd Gilchrist

In "Babylon," Damien Chazelle's film about silent-era Hollywood stars who burned as brightly as they, sadly, did briefly, Li Jun Li plays Lady Fay Zhu, a singer, dancer, actor and sometime title card writer whose ability to make an entrance — even in the midst of the most decadent bacchanal you've ever seen — enables her to steal scenes from co-stars like Brad Pitt and Margot Robbie. Inspired by the real life and career of Chinese American actress Anna May Wong, Li worked closely with writer-director Chazelle to pay tribute to the Hollywood trailblazer while ensuring that she blazes a trail of her own; after watching her suck venom from the neck of Robbie's unconscious Nellie LaRoy, you'll never think of a snakebite the same way again.

● **Your character is inspired by the career and life of Anna May Wong. What about her life principally informed your performance?** She was unable to play leading ladies simply because there were laws that prohibited interracial kissing on screen, and she was famously rejected for the role of the Asian female lead in "The Good Earth" because the male lead was Caucasian, and they gave the role to a Caucasian actress where they painted her makeup like yellowface. It was important that we were able not only to tell that pain, but hopefully, people who watched it were able to empathize.

● **How much latitude did you have to inject your own ideas into bringing this character to life?** Damien is so collaborative and so receptive of what you have to say. In the scene between Lady Fay and her parents, he wrote that scene in Mandarin, and we ended up performing it in Shanghainese because I'm Shanghainese and CiCi Lau, who played my mother, also happened to speak Shanghainese. We talked about behavior amongst Chinese culture, how my name should be written, how it translated into Chinese, everything.

● **There's a point where Fay asks if Nellie is straight. Was there room to play with a bit more contemporary openness?** Definitely. When she asks that question, "does Nellie swing both ways," I think that's a little bit more in the comfort of her own circle. However, I do think that she's been through so much that she just doesn't care — and she might as well go after what she wants. My choice to let her just fearlessly be who she was, was based on just how little she had to lose.

● **How difficult to master were your character's dance performances?** Mandy Moore, who choreographed "La La Land," was so genius in how she came up with the moves. It was just so titillating. But the tango number between Margot and I, [Damien] actually extended because he wanted to capture Margot's and my face rotating in circles as our attraction grows.

● **For the scene where Fay sucks venom out of Nellie's neck, what was the venom made of?** The venom was sitting inside a prosthetic that was attached to Margot's neck, and it was made with honey and a little bit of water. But because she had battled that snake for so long, there was so much sand and grit. And so while the idea of it was really sweet — I'm kissing Margot Robbie, and there's honey involved — it was really gritty at the same time. I felt bad that I had to suck out of that weird thing on her neck.

● **Are there lessons as a performer that you take away from the themes of a movie like "Babylon?"** Yes, how far you're willing to go and how much you're willing to sacrifice for success and fame. I know for myself, I need to ride this wave and enjoy it and hope for the best and I just want to be in here in my career, and I do want to do the best work while I can.

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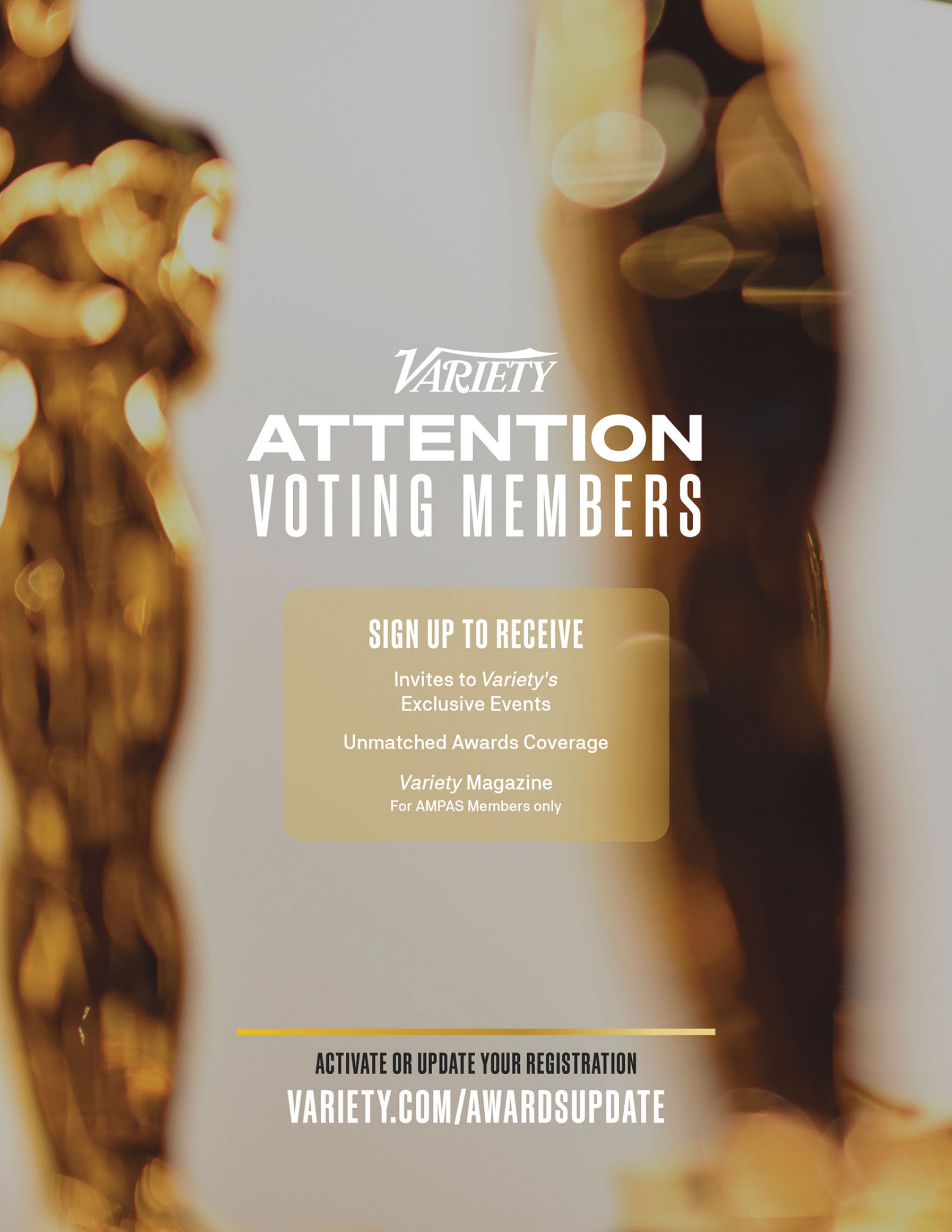
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